



Ken Newton,  
CEO, VASA

## Under the Southern Cross

# Knowledge can be a competitive edge

It's annual general meeting time down here, so by the time you read this it will all be over for another year and a new Board of Directors will have settled into another round of member issues, new refrigerant, the hydrocarbon bogey, the carbon tax, and technology that seems out of control.

When I say new Board of Directors, I mean largely the same board, the same old troops who keep putting their hand up every year because nobody else will. When was the last time you went to an annual meeting – any meeting – and had to mark a ballot paper because candidates were jockeying for a position on the board or the committee?

Our VASA members have never experienced the thrill of the ballot box, the counting of votes, the scrutineers, the disappointments, the unabashed joy of winning. That's right, we always manage to have just the right number of candidates for the vacant board positions. I mean we're only talking about seven people. How difficult can it be?

A few tears will have been shed at the meeting this year. The man who is credited with starting VASA, and who was its president for the first ten years of its life, Mark Mitchell, is not standing again.

This is the man who has fought VASA's battles at all levels of government and who understands the mobile A/C industry better than most. Never afraid to speak up for his members and the industry, he became known

as the VASA 'terrier'. In 2005, Mark was given VASA's highest honour – VASA Legend. Only one other person has ever been given that title and that was Texan Frank Allison, former CEO of IMACA which has long since been absorbed into MACS. Frank visited VASA several times in the early years to give advice and encouragement to the fledgling organisation.

But Mark, being the political animal that he is, made sure he had a good replacement in the wings. While VASA doesn't really run on state lines, it so happens that the directors are scattered around Australia and New Zealand, making for a wide and very fair representation. So Mark has made way for another Queenslander, a younger generation workshop owner from the old gold town of Gympie. His name is Brett Meads and he's one of those guys who attends every VASA event, every convention and every training day. He'll be a good replacement for Mark, who will no doubt mentor him for a while.

Our president Ian Stangroome, who owns a workshop in Adelaide, thought his end of year summary should be uplifting. As he said, "How do you summarise a year when so many events, financial issues, government turmoil and natural disasters have impacted on everyone's business – not just ours."

He told his members that they really represented an elite society of knowledgeable and professional tradesmen and women.

"If the events of the past year have demonstrated anything, it is that there is a very close relationship between profitability and continuous learning. And in this trade the gathering and absorbing of new information must be a continuing passion," Ian said.

He pointed out that aftermarket workshops are not just an alternative to the dealerships. Without the aftermarket workshops, Australian and New Zealand roads would be littered with vehicles which simply cannot be repaired because there are not the skills available to repair them.

While it's true that something like 80%

of purchasers of new vehicles will return to the dealerships for an average of three years to protect their warranties, the moment the vehicle is out of warranty, the figure is reversed. After an average of three years, sometimes less, 80% of the vehicle fleet is looked after by aftermarket workshops.

The astounding fact that aftermarket workshops must learn to service, maintain and repair hundreds of different vehicle makes and models, makes the aftermarket workshops very smart institutions. Dealerships service mostly one make of vehicle, and even then, most dealerships have long since abandoned complex diagnostic processes and they simply remove and replace, and often they do this as often as necessary to stumble on the real cause of the problem.

This amounts to an incredible waste of resources under warranty, and an often horrendous and unnecessary plunder of the customer's wallet very soon out of warranty.

"This is not to be construed as an attack on the dealership network," Ian hastened to add, "but simply an acceptance of reality. We should take advantage of this situation, and I would urge all aftermarket workshops to establish and maintain working relationships with the dealerships within their areas. I believe these relationships can be mutually beneficial."

Ian finished off by telling members that knowledge was their competitive edge, and the more they have, the more profitable their potential. Not a bad bit of advice to kick off a new year. ❀

*Editor's note: The MACS staff was honoured by a visit at the national office from Mark Mitchell during his recent business trip to the U.S. The staff noted that his depth of knowledge of the mobile air conditioning industry – everything from expansion of the industry in the Sixties to cutting-edge technology today. His worldwide perspective and boundless energy are inspiring.*

